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Powers Tells of His U-2 Mission

By JOSEPH G. O'KEEFE

OPERATION OVERFLIGHT. By Francis Gary Powers with Curt Gentry. Holt, Rinehart and Winston. 375 pages. $6.95.

A decade ago, the sudden exposure of the U-2 spy-in-the-sky operation shattered a lull in the cold war and spilled an astonishing array of espionage secrets before the world.

In the years since, Francis Gary Powers, the pilot around whom most of the international controversy swirled, has assessed his experiences and concluded that he was elected scapegoat of the tangled spy mission by acclamation.

Powers presents his observations here in volume that offers some perceptive judgments on diplomatic and intelligence skirmishing in high U.S. government echelons. Since the airman was at the vortex of these dramatic events, it seems reasonable to accept the validity of his appraisals, even though expressed in the words of Curt Gentry, a freelance writer.

It didn't lie within the capability of every little ol' Virginia boy to scuttle a scheduled summit conference between President Eisenhower and Nikita Khrushchev. But Powers achieved this on May 1, 1960, when his spy plane was shot down near Sverdlovsk, about 1,300 miles inside the Russian border. The event plunged the pilot into a grim personal ordeal and touched off frantic backstage maneuvering in the Central Intelligence Agency.

Powers took his first step into the shadowy world of espionage in 1952 when he left the Air Force as a first lieutenant and signed a CIA contract to man Operation Overflight at $2,500 a month. He and other civilian pilots were to reconnoiter Soviet borders and Soviet territory in the new U-2, a plane able to fly higher than any other model. The assumption was that it could fly above the range of Soviet radar.

The U-2s were equipped with ejection seats and destruct devices that could be set off by the pilot to destroy sophisticated instruments such as cameras or radios, Powers says. The fliers were also given cyanide tablets for their optional use, if they encountered trouble.

Such spy missions, using cameras of extraordinary range, went on for about four years, with the Russians evidently aware of them, but powerless to act, the airman contends. But it was not until a few days before the planned summit season that a trip all the way across Russia was ordered. Powers was given the assignment.

He had penetrated into Russia for about four hours, maintaining radio silence, when disaster struck.

"There was a dull thump, the aircraft jerked forward and a tremendous orange flash lit the cockpit and the sky," his story says.

The pilot chuted safely and was quickly captured. Parts of the apparently fragile plane survived the 13-mile plunge and the Russians seized maps and film. Powers theorized he had been the victim of a near-miss by a Soviet missile. He had received no agency briefing on what to do in event of capture.

"You may as well tell everything," an intelligence officer said, "because they're going to get it anyway."

But in his subsequent interrogation, trial and imprisonment, Powers gave frank answers only when it appeared they could be checked out. In other areas he was more devious.

He falsified the U2's maximum altitude, which was much greater than 68,000 feet. He feigned ignorance of the sophisticated equipment, contending he merely flicked switches. He identified CIA officials only by their "cover" names. By these tactics he hoped his agency would get the message.

But events at home were not assuring to the American after he had received a 10-year prison sentence. The first cautious admission was that the U-2 was a lost weather plane. However, Eisenhower's acceptance of the responsibility ended further subterfuge.

Later, American newspaper articles appeared saying that the spy plane had been hit at 35,000 feet rather than 68,000. Powers inferred this to mean that someone in government had sized up Russian missiles as effective only up to 35,000 feet, and was now trying to bolster his theory. Another story read that when Powers was released he intended to remain in Russia.

Eventually, the airman's father, Oliver Powers, a shoe repairman in Pound, Va., initiated the move which led to the exchange of Col. Rudolf Abel, the Soviet master spy, in return for young Powers and another American.

Back home, Powers was debriefed by the CIA in a series of extensive interviews. He was questioned at length by Judge E. Barrett Prettyman and passed a lie detector test. Certain insights concerning the Russians which he offered the agency were ignored, the flier says.

Outside the agency, Powers' conduct in captivity was widely criticized. Many expressed the opinion he had been cowardly.

Ultimately, the CIA issued an 11-page statement upholding their pilot's actions under stress. Certain parts of this, as interpreted by Powers, were intended to get the agency off the hook.

Powers related his story at a public session of the Senate Armed Services Committee, but, a scheduled appointment with President Kennedy was cancelled without explanation.

Things never went so well with the flier as he had hoped. Although he contended a written pledge existed that he could return to the Air Force and receive credit for the time spent in Operation Overflight, the Air Force reneged on the deal. He then joined Lockheed Aircraft as an engineer test pilot.

When the CIA awarded the Intelligence Star to several pilots in Operation Overflight, Powers was bypassed. After a star was belatedly bestowed on him it was dated for services before his Russian expedition.

Besides reconnoitering Russia, Powers discloses the U2 proved its merits at many other trouble spots. Under this all-seeing eye, scarcely any hostile major military development could remain hidden long.

Imaginative historians might enjoy speculating on what course the summit talks might have followed had they taken place as planned. Eisenhower knew a great deal about Soviet military potential, and Khrushchev knew he knew. How would they play their cards?

FRANCIS POWERS

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